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Poems of Dedication

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BY

STEPHEN SPENDER



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THESE POEMS

ARE INSCRIBED TO

THE MEMORY OF

MARGARET SPENDER

WHO DIED

ON CHRISTMAS DAY

1945

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Part One

ELEGY FOR MARGARET

Elegy for Margaret

I

Darling of our hearts, drowning
In the thick night of ultimate sea
Which (indeed) surrounds us all, but where we
Are crammed islands of flesh, wide
With a few harvesting years, in our own lives disowning
The bitter salt severing tide;

Here in this room you are outside this room,
Here in this body your eyes drift away,
While the invisible vultures feed on
Your flesh, and those who read the doom
Of the ill-boding omens say
The name of a disease which, like a villain

Seizes on the pastures of your life
Then gives you back some pounds of flesh, only again
To twist you on that rack of pain
Where your skeleton cuts through you like a knife,
And the weak eyes flinch with their own weak light
Of hope, which blinds our hoping watching sight.

Until hope signs us to despair—what lives
Seems what most kills—what fights your fate
Loses most strength—and the loved face which smiles
Mirrors the mocking illness which contrives
Moving away some miles
To ricochet again at the fixed date.

Least of our world, yet you are most our world
Here where the well are those who hide
In dreams of life painted by dying desire
From violence of our time outside;
Where those who most live are most often hurled
With heroic eyes through waters shot with fire.

Where sailors' eyes rolling on floors of seas
Hold in their fading darkening irises
The vision of some lost still living girl
The possible attainable happy peace
Of Europe, with its pastures fertile,
Dying, like a girl, of a doomed, hidden disease.

So, to be honest, I must wear your death
Next to my heart, where others wear their love.
Indeed, it is my love, my link with life
My word of life being death upon my breath.
My dying word because of you can live
Crowned with your death, so not evading truth.

II

(To H. S.)

Dearest and nearest brother
No word can turn to day
The freezing night of silence
Where all your dawns delay
Watching flesh of your Margaret
Wither in sickness away.

Yet those we lose, we learn
With singleness to love:
Regret stronger than passion holds
Her the times remove:
All those past doubts of life, her death
One happiness does prove.

Better in death to know
The happiness we lose
Than die in life in meaningless
Misery of those
Who lie beside chosen
Companions they never choose.

Orpheus, maker of music,
Clasped his pale bride
Upon that terrible river
Of the ghosts who have died.
Then of his poems, the uttermost
Laurel sprang from his side.

When your red eyes follow
Her body dazed and hurt
Under the torrid mirage
Of delirious desert,
Her breasts break with white lilies,
Her eyes with Margaret.

As child, of those who played
With me, I sought you most:
Our twining hands and leafy eyes
Under world-schemes are lost;
And the kiss that reconciled
No longer spares the cost.

I bring no consolation
Of the weeping shower
Whose final dropping jewel deletes
All grief in the sun's power:
You must watch these things grow worse
Day after day, hour after hour.

Yet to accept the worst
Is finally to revive
When we are equal with the force
Of force with which we strive
And having almost lost, at last
Know that such was to live.

As she will live who, candle-lit.
Floats upon her final breath,

The ceiling of the frosty night
And her high room beneath,
Wearing not like destruction, but
Like a white dress, her death.

III

From a tree choked by ivy, rotted
By kidney-shaped fungus on the bark,
From out a topmost branch
A spray of leaves is seen
Spreading against the metal sky its mark,
As though the dying tree could launch
The drained life of the sap
Into the shoot of one last glance
Above the lapping shining circling evergreen.

So with you, Margaret,
Where you are lying,
The strong tree of your limbs dragged back
By harsh cords of regret,
And the golden sorrowful flesh
Scorched by hot disease,
How difficult is dying
In your living, dying eyes!

How tediously the clock kills
When your fading breath
Launches one usual word
Above the rigid body of death.
A trickling water fills
The sad well of your body
With gradual drops of dying
—Yet all the love we knew
Still smiles on your eyes.

Oh how, when you have died,
Shall I remember to forget
And with knives to separate
Your death from my life—
Since, darling, there is never a night
But the restored prime of your youth
With all its flags does not float
Upon my sleep like a boat,
With the glance which will live
Inescapably as truth.

IV

Poor girl, inhabitant of a strange land
Where death stares through your gaze,
As though a distant moon
Shone through midsummer days
With the skull-like glitter of night:

Poor child, you wear your summer dress
And your shoes striped with gold
As the earth wears a variegated cover
Of grass and flowers
Covering caverns of destruction over
Where hollow deaths are told.

I look into your sunk eyes,
Shafts of wells to both our hearts,
Which cannot take part in the lies
Of acting these gay parts.
Under our lips, our minds
Become one with the weeping
Of the mortality
Which through sleep is unsleeping.

Of what use is my weeping?
It does not carry a surgeon's knife
To cut the wrongly multiplying cells
At the root of your life.
It can only prove
That extremes of love

Stretch beyond the flesh to hideous bone
Howling in hyena dark alone.

Oh, but my grief is thought, a dream,
Tomorrow's gale will sweep away.
It does not wake every day
To the facts which are and do not only seem:
The granite facts around your bed,
Poverty-stricken hopeless ugliness
Of the fact that you will soon be dead.

V

(i)

Already you are beginning to become
Fallen tree-trunk with sun-burnished limbs
In an infinite landscape among tribal bones
Encircled by encroaching ritualistic stones.

(ii)

Those that begin to cease to be your eyes
Are flowers parched of their honey where memories
Crowd over and fly out like avid butterflies.
The striped and glittering colours of lost days,
Swallow-tail, Red Admiral, fritillaries,
Feed on your eyes and then fly from our gaze.

(iii)

In the corner of the bed you are already partly ghost
A whispering scratching existence almost lost
To our blatant life which spreads through all the rooms
Our contrast transient as heaped consoling blooms.

(iv)

You are so quiet; your hand on the sheet seems a mouse.
Yet when we look away, the flails
Which pound and beat you down with ceaseless pulse
Shake like a steam hammer through the house.

(v)

Evening brings the opening of the windows.

Now your last sunset throws
Shadows from the roots of all the trees,
Atrean hounds it unleashes
In front of a sky in which there burns a rose.
The Furies point and strain forwards
The pack of night is crowding towards us.

VI

The final act of love
Is not of dear and dear
Blue-bird-shell eye pink-sea-shell ear
Dove twining voice with dove:

Oh, no, it is the world-storm fruit,
Sperm of tangling distress,
Mouth roaring in the wilderness,
Fingernail tearing at dry root.

The deprived fanatic lover,
Naked in the desert
Of all except his heart,
In his abandon must cover

With wild lips and torn hands,
With blanket made from his own hair,
With comfort made from his despair,
The sexless body in the sands.

He follows that bare path
Where the flesh guides to the skull
And the skull into hollows, full
Of delirium and death.

Dazed, he sees himself among
Saints, who slept with leprous sins,
Whose tongues grow on such ruins
And such a wild fire is his tongue—

"How far we travelled, sweetheart,
Since that day when first we chose
Each other as each other's rose,
And put all other worlds apart.

"Now we assume this coarseness
Of loved and loving bone
Where all are all and all alone
And to love means to bless
Everything and everyone."

Part Two

LOVE, BIRTH, AND ABSENCE

(To Natasha)

Summer

The midsummer glow
Reflected in her eyes
Is colour of clover
In grass flesh where she lies.
Bird-shadow cloud-shadow
Draw a net of sighs
Over her from her sun-gold lover.

Through the August days
She drinks his acres of light
Which, quivering through dark dreams
Beyond mind-sight and eye-sight,
Reach a womb where his rays
Penetrate her night,
In brilliant black commingling streams.

What pallor ah what dearth
When August's flesh,
Kaleidoscope of flowers
And September's rusted fetish
Are lidded under earth!
Then the eyes vanish
With fair forgotten withered harvest hours.

Four Eyes

The core of the day
Is these twin spheres of eyes
Where cloud, stone, clover,
All things beheld, stay,
World of summer which lies
Buried in loved and lover.

He reads in her gaze
Words inscribed by her sight
On stone and clover, those dreams
Which sprang from his praise.
Through their four eyes, light
Of world and world streams.

Alas, what dearth
Of sun, when clasped flesh,
With coronals of flowers,
Charioteer under earth—
O eyes which were a mesh
To net the summer hours!

The Dream

"You dream," he said, "because of the child
Asleep in the nest of your body, whose dreams
Flutter through your blood in streams."

Her lips dreamt, and he smiled.

He laid his head, weighed with a thought
On the sleep of her lips. Thus, locked
Within the lens of their embrace
They watched the life their lives had wrought
The folded future active street
With walls of flesh and crowning face,
Within her flesh complete,
Between their clinging bodies rocked.

Man and Woman

Through man's love and woman's love
Moons and tides move
Which fuse those islands, lying face to face.
Mixing in naked passion
Those who naked new life fashion
Are themselves reborn in naked grace.

The Trance

Sometimes, apart in sleep, by chance,
You fall out of my arms, alone
Into the chaos of your separate trance.
My eyes gaze through your forehead, through the bone,
And see where in your mind distress has torn
Its violent path, which on your lips is shown
And on your hands under your dream forlorn.

Restless, you turn to me, and press
Those timid words against my ear
Which thunder at my heart like stones.
"Mercy," you plead. Then "Who can bless?"
You ask. "I am pursued by Time," you moan.
I watch that precipice of fear
You tread, naked in naked distress.

To that deep care we are committed
Beneath the wildness of our flesh
And shuddering horror of our dream,
Where unmasked agony is permitted.
Our bodies, stripped of clothes that seem,
And our souls, stripped of beauty's mesh,
Meet our true selves, their charms outwitted.

This pure trance is the oracle
That speaks no language but the heart.
Our angel with our devil meets

In the atrocious night, nor do they part
But each each forgives and greets,
And their mutual terrors heal
Within our love's deep miracle.

Absence

No one is perfection, yet
When, being without you, I console
Myself, by dwelling on some blemish
Once marked, which now might mar the whole,
Telling myself your absence might become my wish.

Oh then, that blemish which I set
Between us, vanishes.
I see only the pure you in your eyes,
Remembering how they light
With mine. All that between us lies
Is opened like a gate
Through which our memories unite
The oneness of their wishes.

Absence has the quality of ice
On a high peak, above a landscape of snow:
It is a freezing lens which magnifies
The valley of the roofs and hearths below.
Each twig and footprint shows in glassy outline
Of black and white which simplifies
Like passion. Blank light shines
On the home faces, surrounding them with white
As though flesh were the halo of the eyes.

Arrows of light pierce through the mist,
Lapis lazuli has pressed

Its burning way through smothering cloud
To show upon the world your face which seems
A miracle among macabre dreams,
Like a madonna painted on a shroud.

Lost

Horizontal on amber air three boughs of green
Lift slotted sleeves. Beyond them, the house glows
Straight mouldings delineate tall windows.
Glass panes weigh the balance between
Garden mirrored and interior darkly seen.

That cracked stucco wall seems the rind
Of miles and days from here to what I savour:
My thought, biting it, penetrates the flavour
Of a shining withheld day behind
Where sweetness entered me, body and mind.

Against that wall my eating memories press
As though through my own flesh into my heart.
One room, my heart, holds a girl with lips apart
Watching a child starred in his nakedness.
Her gaze covers him like a fleecy dress.

That is the room where the world was most precious
Where jewelled silence on their eyes collects
The light which each from each reflects.
Here lamp and wooden furniture are gracious.
All other times and places seem atrocious.

My spirit shut outside them is a ghost
Gazing through clay and gales at his warm past.
From out my empty everywhere I cast
My seeing unseen eyes through the time lost
Back to that one room where life was life most.

Part Three

SPIRITUAL EXPLORATIONS

(*To Cecil Day Lewis*)

Spiritual Explorations

We fly through a night of stars
Whose remote frozen tongues speak
A language of mirrors, diamond Greek
Glittering across space, each to each—
O dream of Venus and Mars,
In a dome of extinct life, far far far from our wars.

I

Within our nakedness nakedness still
Hollows our minds. Past and stars show
Through the paper skulls. Tomorrows blow
Away the fabrications of the will.
The Universe, by inches, minutes, fills
Our tongues and senses, name and image glow
With word and form. Star and history know
That they exist in our lives existence kills.
Revolving with the earth's rim through the night
We fragments pulsing blood and breath,
Each separate in consciousness, reunite
In that dark journey to no place or date
Where, naked beneath nakedness, beneath
Our divided condition, all await
The multitudinous loneliness of death.

II

You were born; must die; were loved; must love;
Born naked; were clothed; still naked walk
Under your clothes. Under your skin you move
Naked: naked under acts and talk.
 The miles and hours upon you feed.
They eat your eyes out with their distance
They eat your heart out with devouring need
They eat your death out with lost lost significance.
 There is one fate beneath those ignorances
Those flesh and bone parcels in which you're split
O thing of skin and words hanging on breath:
Harlequin skeleton, it
Strums on your gut such songs and merry dances
Of love, of loneliness, of life being death.

III

Since we are what we are, what shall we be
But what we are? We are, we have
Six feet and seventy years, to see
The light, and then resign it for the grave.
 We are not worlds, no, nor infinity,
We have no claims on stone, except to prove
In the invention of the human city
Our selves, our breath, our death, our love.
 The tower we build soars like an arrow
From the world's rim toward the sky's,
Upwards and downwards in a dazzling pond
Climbing and diving from our world, to narrow
The gap between the world shut in the eyes
And the receding world of light beyond.

IV

We, divided, join again in belief.
 We feel the indivisible knots which bind
Each separately: the ends which blind
The eye revolving inwardly in grief.
 Each circular life gnaws round its little leaf
Of here and now. Each is tied within its kind.
Also nature outside within the mind
Tempts with its tree each one to be a thief.
 Mortals are not aeons, they are not space,
Not empires, not maps: they have only
Bodies, and graves. Yet all the past, the race,
Knowledge and memory, are unfurled
Within each separate head, grown lonely
With time, growing, shedding, the world.

V

The immortal spirit is that single ghost
Of all time, incarnate in one time,
Which through our breathing skeletons must climb
To be within our supple skin engrossed.
Without that ghost within, our lives are lost
Fragments, haunting the earth's rim.
Unless we will it live, that ghost pines, dim,
Lost in our lives; its life, our death, the cost.
One being of present, past, futurity,
Seeks within these many-headed wills
To release the flame-winged dove, humanity.
Shut in himself, each blind, beaked subject kills
His neighbour and himself, and shuts out pity
For that one winging spirit which fulfils.

VI

I am that witness through whom the whole
Knows it exists. Within the coils of blood,
Whispering under sleep, there moves the flood
Of stars, battles, dark and frozen pole.
All that I am I am not. The cold stone
Unfolds its angel for me. On my dreams ride
The racial legends. The stars outside
Glitter under my ribs. Being all, I am alone.
 I who say I call that eye I
Which is the mirror in which things see
Nothing except themselves. I die.
The things, the vision, still will be.
Upon this eye reflections of stars lie
And that which passes, passes away, is I.

VII

Outside, the eternal star-tall mountains gleam
Where changeless changing past and future lock
Their fusing streams into one day of rock
Against whose day my days but shadows seem.
 Within my shut skull flows a historied stream
Of myths, fears, crimes, that hammering stock
Which hews my limbs out of the daylight block
And makes my lives the slave of their past dream.
 The Universe, the dead, humanity, fill
Each world-wide generation with the sigh
Which breathes the music of their will.
Their sensitive, perceiving witness, I,
See mirrored in my consciousness, the ill
Chameleonic harlequin who'll die.

VIII

Light
Light
Burning through eyes and windows
Of the body the will the house

Knife
Knife
Thread-suspended over clasped locked flesh
Where the demoniac powers
Dreaming of power, enclose
The ruinous and to-be-ruined life

Bright
Bright
With lightening compact in dark hours
Strike down tear apart unlock expose
The feud the kiss the will the heart
Of this people imprisoned in night
Their gods mad
Their princes fanged with revenge poisonous and bad
Lost and lolling among the shadows.

Strike to the womb the unborn with new power
Speak to the boy back from the sword-bright war
And with his wounds unbandage his light eyes
Show him him as he is
Show him your own existence as you are
Teach him his blindness teach him to rise

Show him his body and what winged steed
Fulfilments of your grace and his grace need.

Show him the words that bleed
Out of the past and through the present
To the future of his heirs-apparent
Words and Pegasus he must guide
For generation of his generation to ride.

Tell him he does inhabit
Himself yourself, his spirit your spirit,
And let your purposes his purposes
Unfold through buds of him their flowers.

Through walls he builds and towers
O be your truth transparent
Make his hands burn with your burning roses.

Part Four

SEASCAPE AND LANDSCAPE

Midsummer

(*To Edith Sitwell*)

There is midsummer
 Opens all the windows
And drowns the houses
 In fever of dust and rose.

Vibrant transparency above
 The hills is visible.
All night the stars shake through the silence,
 Tangible, audible.

Clear day, you trail
 Whispers of cherry and rambler.
Sun, you'll gild the leaves to wraiths
 Withered in amber.

Within our distraught gale of time
 My secrecy listens
To a dynamo of summer that revolves
 Generating what glistens—

Noon, the moon, straws of light,
 Ringed pulsations on the lake,
Quietness folded on window sills,
 The loads the reapers make.

Would I might be that bough tonight
 Will dip in dews! And, wrung
From my impregnated phosphorescence,
 Honeyed song of my tongue!

But I am tied on strips of time,
 Caged in minutes, made
By men, exiled from the day's brilliance
 In a deliberate shade.

Only, some moment slips between the bars
 Of the raging machines.
It gleams with eternal rumours
 Of the high, midsummer scenes.

Man is that prison where his will
 Has shut without pity
In a clock eternity,
 In his fist, rose of infinity.

Seascape

(*In memoriam M. A. S.*)

There are some days the happy ocean lies
Like an unfingered harp, below the land.
Afternoon gilds all the silent wires
Into a burning music of the eyes.
On mirroring paths between those fine-strung fires
The shore, laden with roses, horses, spires,
Wanders in water, imaged above ribbed sand.

The azure vibrancy of the air tires
And a sigh, like a woman's, from inland
Brushes the golden wires with shadowing hand
Drawing across their chords some gull's sharp cries
Or bell, or gasp from distant hedged-in shires:
These, deep as anchors, the silent wave buries.

Then, from the shore, two zig-zag butterflies,
Like errant dog-roses cross the hot strand
And on the ocean face in spiralling gyres
Seach for foam-honey in reflected skies.
They drown. Witnesses understand
Such wings torn in such ritual sacrifice,

Remembering ships, treasures and cities.
Legendary heroes, plumed with flame like pyres
On flesh-winged ships fluttered from their island

And them the sea engulfed. Their coins and eyes
Twisted by the timeless waves' desires,
Are, through the muscular water, scarcely scanned
While, above them, the harp assumes their sighs.

Meeting

Que mon amour a la semblance
Du beau Phénix, s'il meurt un soir
Le Matin voit sa Renaissance.

APOLLINAIRE

I

At dawn we rose and walked the pavement

I your shadow you my flute

Your voice wove a thread
Through the city in my head

I followed—followed
You, my sole inhabitant.

II

"At last," you sang, "there comes this peace
Beyond war's separating will
Where we are alone, face to face.

"When tomorrow divides us, we shall fill
That space with this peace as now the space
Which, when we are closest, divides us still.

"Distances between us will be crystal
Traversed with illuminating rays
Where our eyes fuse the rainbow of their gaze.

"Gazing into that crystal, behold the possible
Nakedness nakeder than nakedness
Where, stripped of time and place as of a dress,
We meet again, being invisible,

"Farewell——"

III

Then the sun scrawled
Across the white sheet of the day
Twisted iron-black realities
Broken boulevards through which humanity's
Sprawling river Styx
Of corroding shadows crawled.

O but our love was the Phoenix

Above the destroyed city reborn city
Conjoining spires of flame
Tower of wings climbing spear-shaken skies,
Within the ensphered luminous air of eyes
Image of our faith sustained the same.

IV

Your mind and mine became one vase
Where gaze flowed into gaze
Under the surfaces
Of our curved embraces.
Our eyes see with each other's eyes
Though half a world between us lies.

Your night holds my light
My day is clasped by your night.

These words enclose your silences.
One gaze bridges our distances.

When we sleep, our separate dreams
Flow into each other's streams
Wave over far wave slips
Our lips melt into our lips.
On my tongue your tongue
Rustles with your song my song.

V

Into my heart there sprang these words
I no sooner uttered
Than they seemed in their concords
Not mine I said, but yours I heard.

These distances which separate
Drove our lives through that gate
Beyond which our impossible
Presence became invisible,
Our meeting indivisible.

NOTE

Versions of two of the poems in *Elegy for Margaret* (III and IV) appeared in my previous volume, *Ruins and Visions.*

A sketch of the series of poems here called *Spiritual Explorations* (and then called *Spiritual Exercises*) was printed privately at Christmas, 1944. This sketch was also published in *New Writing and Daylight* and in *The Neue Schweizer Rundschau,* where it appeared together with a translation by Professor E. R. Curtius of Bonn, who translated some of my first poems, published in the same periodical, in 1929.

I am indebted to the editor of *New Writing*, *New Writing and Daylight*, *Penguin New Writing*, to the editor of *Horizon* and to editors of other periodicals in which earlier versions of some of these poems have appeared.

S. S.

W
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